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AUTHOR	Cutler, Stephen J.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Cohort changes in attitudes about the availability of legal abortions are traced over a 12-year period using data from seven national surveys. Contrary to the aging-conservatism hypothesis, trends in the direction of increasingly favorable attitudes between 1965 and 1973 and general stability thereafter characterize all cohorts. On this issue, there is no evidence of growing conservatism, attitudinal rigidity, or change at a slower rate among the older cohorts. (Author)

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COHORT CHANGES IN ATTITUDES ABOUT LEGALIZED ABORTION[1]

Stephen J. Cutler, PhD[2]

Sally Ann Lentz, BA[3]

Michael J. Muha, BA[2]

Robert N. Riter, BA[4]

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[2]Dept. of Sociology-Anthropology, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio 44074.

[3]University of Denver College of Law, Denver, Colorado 80204.

[4]Program and Bureau of Hospital Administration, School of Public Health, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109.

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Is aging accompanied by increasingly conservative attitudes? Until quite recently, existing theory and evidence probably would have led most persons to answer yes to this question. Theoretical reasons for expecting aging to be associated with growing conservatism are summarized by Cutler and Kaufman (1975):

> Successive cohorts are socialized to different...attitudes, values, and ideologies as the content of the...culture changes. Associated with the subsequent movement of individual members of the cohorts through the life cycle are psychologically-based, age-related changes in the direction of greater rigidity, cautiousness, and increasing resistance to change. Further pressures against the acceptance of...change become manifest with increasing integration into the social system which leads to a greater stake in the maintenance of the status quo. Presumably, therefore, older cohorts are not only the bearers of the more traditional...culture, but their members increasingly adhere to the content of their earlier socialization as they age.

Seemingly consistent with this theoretical formulation are the results of numerous studies examining the relationship between age and social, political, and economic issues (Glenn, in press; Riley & Foner, 1968). Although important exceptions occur (Foner, 1974), most studies show that older persons are more conservative than middle age persons who, in turn, are more conservative than younger persons. These age differences have frequently been taken as empirical support for the contention that persons become more conservative as they grow older.

This supposition, however, began to be challenged with the recognition that age changes cannot necessarily be inferred from observed age differences (Schaie, 1967). If the attitudes of older persons on some issue are found to be more conservative, this may be a product of aging, of cohort or generational differences in socialization, or of

some combination of the two (Riley, 1973). Because age and cohort effects are confounded, the results of single, cross-sectional studies rarely permit the investigator to draw conclusions about the aging-conservatism relationship.

In an effort to overcome this problem, recent research has begun to employ various types of diachronic methodologies. Resting on the growing availability of archival data spanning long periods of time, Evan (1959) and Glenn and Zody (1970) proposed the use of cohort analysis as one method by which diachronic issues could be examined with data suitable to the study of long-term change. Although the empirical evidence is by no means definitive, it would appear from such studies that aging cohorts tend to change their attitudes in a direction which is consistent with changes in the population as a whole (Foner, 1974; Glenn, 1974). In the area of tolerance of ideological nonconformity, for instance, research by Cutler and Kaufman (1975) and by Nunn, Crockett, and Williams (1978) shows that all cohorts, including the very oldest, have become more tolerant since the mid-1950s. Other findings negating the aging-conservatism hypothesis come from a two and a half decade panel study of traditional morality in which Willits, Bealer, and Crider (1977) demonstrate that attitudes have become markedly more permissive. In short, these findings suggest that attitudinal rigidity is not the norm, that change does occur over time, and that the changes among older cohorts are likely to be in a liberal direction if there is a growing liberalization of attitudes in the society at large.

One qualification to the preceding generalizations is that the

rate of attitude change is frequently variable. A fairly typical pattern is one in which the direction of attitude change is the same for all cohorts but the rate of change is slower among the older cohorts (Glenn, in press). This pattern of change is consistent with the interpretation that period effects exercising liberalizing influences are partially offset among the older cohorts by age-related effects in the direction of growing conservatism. Because most cohort designs do not permit the analyst to allocate these effects in a rigorous and definitive manner, such an interpretation is entirely plausible. Still, what is important to remember on a descriptive level is that the net result of these opposing effects is change in a liberal direction.

To summarize the discussion to this point, the once prevalent notion that aging is generally, if not invariably, associated with growing conservatism has been called into question. Yet, because research on this subject is far from abundant, Glenn's (1974) observation that "the topic of aging and conservatism is a virgin research area in which much remains to be learned" is still valid. To gain additional knowledge will require, at a minimum, further examination of the aging-conservatism hypothesis over an appropriately wide range of issue areas using data and methodologies suitable to the study of long-term change.

This paper seeks to meet these requirements by examining cohort changes in attitudes about the availability of legal abortions. Not only is this a topic of considerable current interest, but it also lends itself quite well to an examination of the aging-conservatism issue for the following reasons. First, opposition to the availability of legal abortions taps two of the dimensions of conservatism discussed by Glenn

(1974; see also Callahan, 1977): "a generally restrictive, rather than permissive and tolerant, attitude toward human behavior," and "resistance to change which would benefit disadvantaged segments of the population." Furthermore, Granberg's (1978) analysis of correlates of opposition to legalized abortion shows that the best predictor "...is a conservative or traditional approach to matters of personal morality." Second, although many trend analyses (e.g., Evers & McGee, 1977) indicate that public opinion has shifted in a liberal direction to a considerable extent since the mid-1960s, only one study (McIntosh & Alston, 1977) examines cohort changes in attitudes about the availability of legal abortions but does so for the purpose of explaining religious differences. Third, data from seven national surveys of the adult population of the United States containing identical questions asked between 1965 and 1977 are available with which to conduct the analysis. Thus, examination of cohort changes in attitudes about the availability of legal abortions, covering a period during which the general trend has been toward more tolerant, permissive, and liberal attitudes, affords a valuable opportunity to extend the existing evidence on the question of the relationship between aging and conservatism.

METHODS

Surveys and Design of the Analysis

Seven surveys, all from the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago and all representing the total non-institutionalized population of the United States, 18 years of age and older, are used in

the analysis. In the 1965 survey (SRS #870), respondents were selected by means of a standard multi-stage area probability sample to the block or segment level with quotas for sex, race, age and employment status at the block level. The 1972-1977 surveys, conducted in the early spring of each year, are NORC's General Social Surveys. The sampling designs used between 1972 and 1974 were also modified multi-stage area probability samples to the block or segment level, with quotas based on sex, age, and employment status at the block level. The 1975 and 1976 surveys combined the sampling design used in the 1972-1974 surveys with a full probability sample, while respondents in the 1977 survey were selected entirely from a stratified, multi-stage area probability sample of culsters of households.

The general research strategy to be used in the study is that of cross-sequential analysis (Riley, Johnson, & Foner, 1972). With this design, the dependent variable score for a sample of a (birth) cohort from one survey is compared with the dependent variable score of a sample of that same cohort drawn from another survey at a later time. For instance, respondents 54 years of age and older in 1965, 61 years of age and older in 1972, 62 years of age and older in 1973, and so on, can be traced over the twelve year period encompassed by the surveys. Comparison of the dependent variable scores for samples of one or more cohorts at two or more times in this manner allows for description of whether, in what direction, and to what extent change has occurred as the cohorts have aged. Table 1 describes the four cohorts on which

Table 1 about here

Table 1. Specific Representation of the Cross-Sequential Design Used for the Analysis of Cohort Changes in Attitudes About the Availability of Legal Abortions

Birth Cohort	1965 Age	1965 N	1972 Age	1972 N	1973 Age	1973 N	1974 Age	1974 N	1975 Age	1975 N	1976 Age	1976 N	1977 Age	1977 N
1936-1947	18-29	317	25-36	412	26-37	368	27-38	363	28-39	334	29-40	352	30-41	352
1924-1935	30-41	335	37-48	322	38-49	304	39-50	288	40-51	295	41-52	237	42-53	298
1912-1923	42-53	353	49-60	339	50-61	289	51-62	271	52-63	248	53-64	278	54-65	284
-1911	54+	458	61+	319	62+	280	63+	278	64+	264	65+	264	66+	206
Total		1,463		1,392		1,241		1,200		1,141		1,131		1,140

comparable attitudinal and background data are available in the seven surveys.

Measurement of the Dependent Variable

Attitudes about the availability of legal abortions were measured by the following six questions that were asked in identical form and order in each of the surveys:

> Please tell me whether or not you think it should be possible for a pregnant woman to obtain a legal abortion...
>
> 1. If there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby?
> 2. If she is married and does not want any more children?
> 3. If the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy?
> 4. If the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children?
> 5. If she became pregnant as a result of rape?
> 6. If she is not married and does not want to marry the man?

A score of 1 was assigned to "yes" responses on each item, a score of 0 to "no" responses, and all other responses were assigned to a missing data category. Guttman scale analysis was performed on the full set of six items in each survey. Because previous research has often distinguished between "hard" or medical (1, 3, and 5 above) and "soft" or elective (2, 4, and 6 above) reasons, similar analyses were performed on each set of three items. The coefficients of reproducibility and scalability reported in Table 2 and the nearly invariant structure of

Table 2 about here

Table 2. Coefficients of Reproducibility and Scalability for the Dependent Variable Scales

Scales	1965	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
3-Item "Hard" Reasons Scale[a]							
Reproducibility	.898	.926	.948	.942	.940	.935	.947
Scalability	.742	.676	.683	.625	.665	.631	.674
3-Item "Soft" Reasons Scale[b]							
Reproducibility	.939	.928	.933	.928	.929	.939	.919
Scalability	.663	.822	.856	.844	.846	.868	.825
6-Item "General" Reasons Scale[c]							
Reproducibility	.916	.925	.938	.931	.933	.946	.932
Scalability	.710	.763	.802	.776	.789	.798	.784

[a]This scale measures approval of the availability of legal abortions if (a) there is a strong chance of serious defect in the baby, (b) the woman's own health is seriously endangered by the pregnancy, and (c) she became pregnant as a result of rape.

[b]This scale measures approval of the availability of legal abortions if (a) she is married and does not want any more children, (b) the family has a very low income and cannot afford any more children, and (c) she is not married and does not want to marry the man.

[c]This scale includes all of the six items.

responses to the items in the seven surveys justify treating them in the form of summary scales. Thus, three-item scales were constructed measuring approval of the availability of legal abortions for "hard" and "soft" reasons, respectively. Scores on these two scales range from 0 (low approval) to 3 (high approval). A general scale tapping approval for the full set of six reasons was also constructed with scores varying between 0 (low approval) and 6 (high approval).

Data Analysis Procedures

Any analysis tracing cohort changes over an extended period of time must confront the problem of variable cohort composition resulting from non-random mortality. Because cohort flow is accompanied by changing sex, race, and socioeconomic composition, differential attrition can affect the dependent variable score if the sources of attrition are related to the dependent variable. For instance, the higher mortality of persons of lower socioeconomic status results in a cohort that is progressively more elite in terms of its educational attainment. Given that approval of abortion is related to level of educational attainment (Granberg, 1978), such differential attrition would have the artifactual result of producing higher levels of approval in a cohort owing to its changing compositional characteristics. To compensate for this effect, multivariate controls should be applied in order to approximate compositional comparability.

This is done in the present study with Multiple Classification Analysis (MCA). This multivariate technique, designed for use with

nominal and ordinal predictor variables, will permit the application of simultaneous controls to remove the effects of education, sex, and race. More generally, MCA can be used to examine the relationship between each of a set of predictor variables and a dependent variable holding the effects of the remaining predictors constant (e.g., the relationship between cohort differences on abortion attitudes in each survey controlling for the effects of education, sex, and race). When multiple predictors are so employed, MCA yields an adjusted net score that is equivalent to the mean value of the dependent variable for each category of a given predictor after statistically controlling for the effects of the remaining predictors. By removing such effects, changing cohort composition can be ruled out as a source of any observed intra-cohort changes over the twelve year period. In addition to examining patterns in the net mean scores themselves, the results are also interpreted using an F-test (F_{net}) that indicates the statistical significance of the between-cohort differences in each of the surveys after partialling out the effects attributable to the other demographic and socioeconomic predictors.

RESULTS

Before considering specific cohort trends, it is useful to examine the grand mean scores for the three scales in the seven surveys. Three main points can be noted in regard to the general trends in attitudes about the availability of legal abortions as shown by the data presented in Table 3. First, the major increases in favorable attitudes occurred

between 1965 and 1972. Regardless of which scale is being considered, attitudes had become considerably more favorable prior to the Supreme

Table 3 about here

Court's landmark decision on abortion in January of 1973. Second, reflecting either the maintenance of these pre-existing changes or the consequences of the Supreme Court's decision, attitudes continued to shift in the direction of being more favorable through 1974 but at a much diminished rate. From 1974 through 1977, there is some variability and fluctuation, but the general picture portrayed by the data is one of a plateau having been reached around 1974 with no appreciable tendency thereafter for public opinion on abortion to have become more or less favorable. The period 1973-1974, therefore, appears to signal the end of the recent liberalization of attitudes about abortion. Third, while these general patterns are the same for the two component scales, it should also be noted that the medical or "hard" reasons for abortion enjoy substantially greater support over the entire period than do the "soft" or elective reasons.

With these general trends as background, is there inter-cohort variability in the trends? In particular, do the older cohorts show any evidence of growing conservatism, attitudinal rigidity, or change in a liberal direction but at a slower rate? The data bearing on these questions are given in Figure 1 which, for ease of presentation, plots the net mean scores for the four cohorts across the seven surveys.

Table 3. Grand Mean Scores on the Dependent Variable Scales

Scales	1965	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
3-Item "Hard" Reasons Scale[a]							
Grand Means	1.81	2.32	2.52	2.53	2.46	2.48	2.51
3-Item "Soft" Reasons Scale[a]							
Grand Means	.54	1.22	1.40	1.41	1.39	1.38	1.41
6-Item "General" Reasons Scale[b]							
Grand Means	2.36	3.54	3.92	3.96	3.86	3.86	3.92

[a]Scores on this scale range from 0 (low approval) to 3 (high approval).

[b]Scores on this scale range from 0 (low approval) to 6 (high approval).

To begin, it would appear that there is neither growing conservatism nor attitudinal rigidity among the older cohorts. Looking at the

Figure 1 about here

period between 1965 and 1973 when the greatest changes occurred, it is clear that the attitudes of the older cohorts on the three scales, like those of the younger cohorts, became more favorable. Although changes in the post-1973 period are far less dramatic, the older cohorts display much the same kind of variability in their attitudes about the availability of legal abortions as do the younger cohorts. Thus, over the entire period, Figure 1 shows (A) that change rather than rigidity is characteristic of the attitudes of the older cohorts, and (B) that their attitudes have shifted in the same liberal direction as those of the younger cohorts.

If there is no evidence of growing conservatism or of attitudinal rigidity, is there any support for previous findings which show that the rate of change is less rapid among the older cohorts? If it were the case that the older cohorts became more liberal but at a slower rate, we should find increasing gaps between the older and younger cohorts on the dependent variable scales. Because the inter-cohort differences on the three abortion scales in 1965 were statistically insignificant by the F-tests for net effects (see Table 4), changes at discernibly variable rates should result in the emergence of statistically significant cohort differences reflecting the growing attitudinal divergence.

Table 4 about here

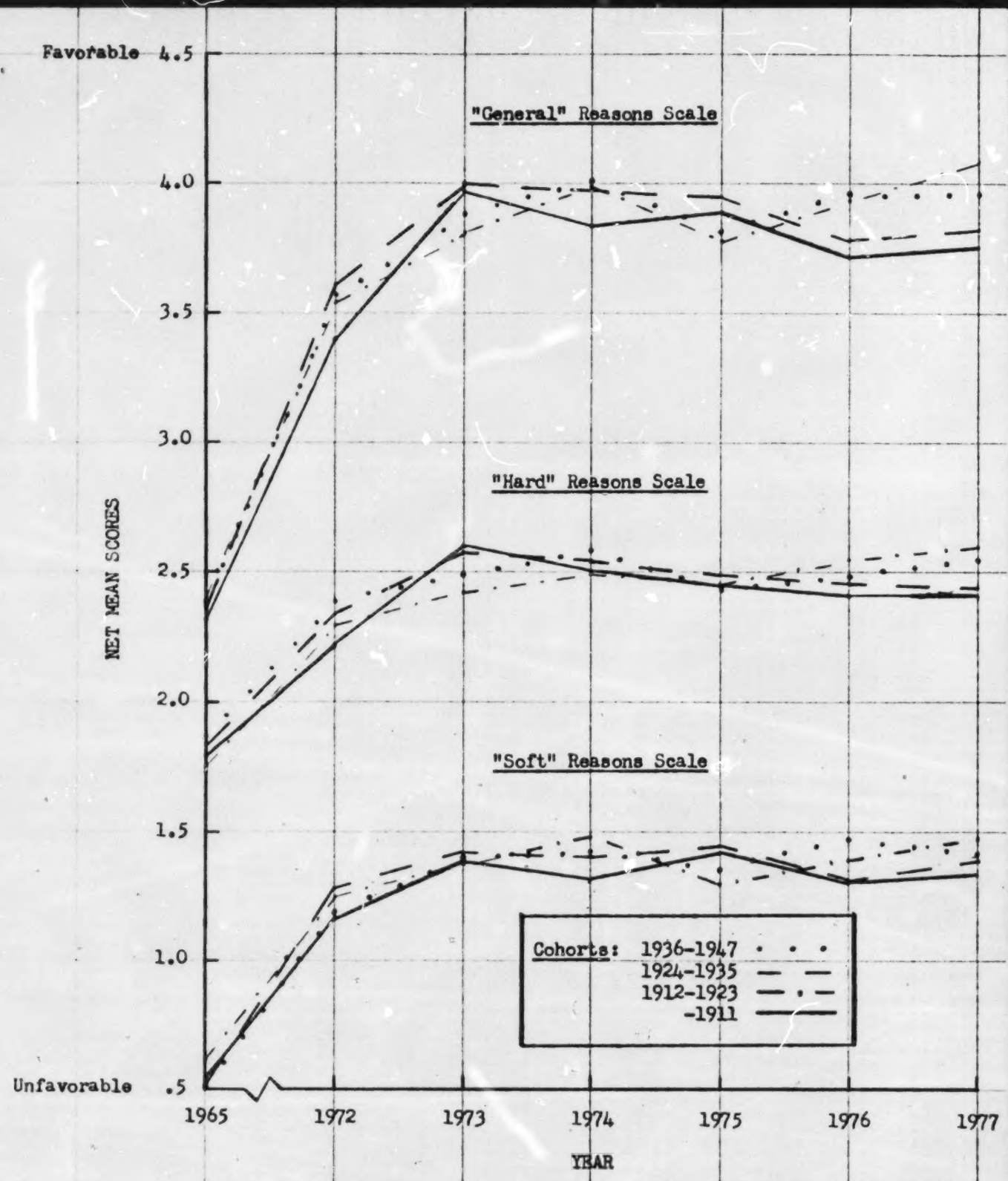

Fig. 1. Cohort Changes in Attitudes About the Availability of Legalized Abortions

Table 4. Probability Values Associated with F-Tests of Significance[a] of Cohort Differences

Scales	1965	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
3-Item "Hard" Reasons Scale							
p	.57	.27	.07	.64	.96	.35	.06
3-Item "Soft" Reasons Scale							
p	.36	.66	.98	.52	.52	.45	.65
6-Item "General" Reasons Scale							
p	.97	.55	.55	.68	.70	.39	.21

[a] $F_{(net)}$ tests controlling for education, sex, and race.

The data in Table 4 present the probability values associated with the tests of significance for the net effects of cohort differences after controlling for education, sex, and race. On none of the scales and in none of the surveys do these values reach the .05 level. At least between 1965 and 1977, the intra-cohort trends have been insufficiently variable to produce statistically significant inter-cohort differences. Thus, the trends toward liberalization of attitudes about the availability of legal abortions between 1965 and 1973 and the general stabilization of attitudes between 1973 and 1977 appear to characterize all cohorts examined in this analysis. The older cohorts, in other words, have neither been so resistant to change nor so prone to move in a conservative direction during a period of stability that appreciable differences have emerged between them and the younger cohorts.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The notion that aging is associated with increasingly conservative social, political, and economic attitudes, a notion which formerly enjoyed widespread acceptance, has been challenged recently by the results of longitudinal and cohort analyses. These studies suggest that the attitudes of older persons change in a liberal, tolerant, or permissive direction if the attitudes of the general population are moving that way. Although some research findings note that older cohorts change at a slower rate, there is no evidence of attitudinal rigidity or of any aging effects in a conservative direction of sufficient strength to offset period effects in a liberal direction.

These conclusions, however, rest on a limited number of studies. Thus, there is a continuing need to evaluate the aging-conservatism hypothesis over a wide range of issues with data that lend themselves to diachronic analysis. This paper extends the evidence into the area of attitudes about the availability of legal abortions. Six identical questions, asked in each of seven national surveys of the adult population of the United States, were examined in the form of three scales: (A) a scale tapping approval of the availability of legal abortions for the so-called "hard" or medical reasons, (B) a scale measuring approval for "soft" or elective reasons, and (C) a general approval scale. The scores of four cohorts on these scales were traced over the twelve year period 1965-1977 using Multiple Classification Analysis to control for the effects of changing cohort composition.

The results show that attitudes about the availability of legal abortions became considerably more liberal during the period 1965-1973. Within a year after the Supreme Court handed down its January, 1973 decision on abortion, however, public opinion became relatively stable, albeit with minor fluctuations between 1974 and 1977. Of even greater import given the purpose of this study is the finding that this general pattern characterized all cohorts examined in the analysis. Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence is that statistically significant differences between the cohorts appeared at none of the seven time points covered in the study. Had there been any support for the aging-conservatism hypothesis in any of its various forms--attitude change in a conservative direction, no change or attitudinal rigidity, or growing liberalism but at a markedly slower pace--cohort differences should have

become more pronounced over the twelve year period. This pattern was nowhere observed with sufficient strength so as to yield statistically significant cohort differences. Thus, we conclude (A) that aging is not necessarily or inevitably accompanied by increasingly conservative attitudes, (B) that older persons are neither so rigid nor so resistant to change that their attitudes are invariant, and (C) that in times of growing liberalism, the attitudes of older persons can and do change in the same direction and to the same degree as those of younger persons.

We can only speculate on the reasons why cohort changes in attitudes about the availability of legal abortions were relatively uniform in contrast to other studies finding that change in a liberal direction occurred at a slower rate among the older cohorts. One possibility discussed by Foner (1974) relates to the level of generality of the issues being considered. To change general and fundamental socio-political orientations, she hypothesizes, may require profound alterations in an individual's values. On such general issues, then, persons may become more impervious to change as they grow older. Fairly specific issues, however, may be more conducive to change by not requiring major shifts in individual value systems. From this perspective, tolerance of ideological nonconformity (Cutler & Kaufman, 1975; Nunn et al., 1978) and the admission of Red China to the United Nations (Glenn, 1974), areas in which older cohorts changed in the same direction but more slowly than younger cohorts, would represent more general and less proximate issues. Although the members of older cohorts are themselves unlikely to be affected by whether legal abortions are available, it is an issue that

is more specific, more proximate in that it may affect their children, and one that they can probably "...evaluate in light of their own experience" (Foner, 1974). Because this interpretation is clearly an ex post facto one, further research is needed to determine whether generality and proximity prove to be good predictive dimensions of the direction and extent of attitude change with aging.

Other implications of the results deserve mention. First, the findings have some bearing on the question of the impact of legislative and judicial change on attitudes. There is little agreement as to whether legislation reflects or effects attitude change (Colombotos, 1969). It is possible that the burst of reform and repeal legislation passed in many states, beginning with Colorado in 1967, was responsible for the major shifts in public opinion on abortion between 1965 and 1973. However, the Supreme Court's decision on abortion in January of 1973 clearly did not result in trends toward appreciably more tolerant, permissive, and liberal attitudes. The judgment handed down by the Court more nearly signalled the cessation of growing approval. Consideration of the causal dynamics is beyond the scope and intent of this paper, but it is worthy of note that change in formal, legal norms in this area was not subsequently accompanied by parallel changes in public opinion.

Second, in a recent article Schreiber (1978; see also Fischer, 1978) explores the interesting notion of the "life history" of social issues. Variation in the strength of the relationship between education and liberal social attitudes over time is interpreted as reflecting differential awareness of changing legal and social conditions. This awareness,

fostered through exposure to the mass media, leads persons with higher levels of education to change their attitudes early which, in turn, strengthens the relationship between education and the issue being considered. As knowledge and awareness eventually filter or "trickle" down to persons at the lower educational levels, they also change and the magnitude of the education relationship diminishes over time.

Schreiber's discussion suggests a broader implication of the results of this analysis. If the rate of attitude change may be construed as an indicator of awareness of changing social norms and conditions through exposure to the mass media, the present findings counter the disengagement theory of aging in still another way. Just as Glenn (1969) found no evidence of decreasing opinionation with age, our findings indicate that older cohorts have been as aware as younger cohorts of changing social norms about the availability of legal abortions. In that sense, then, aging does not appear to have been associated with disengagement.

Finally, and on a more practical level, Glenn (1977) seems to be correct in observing that

> ...persons directing campaigns to change attitudes and behavior who "write off" older persons as a lost cause are making a serious strategic error if in fact many older persons are ammenable to many kinds of change.

Consistent with the results of other diachronic studies, this analysis shows that older persons can change their attitudes over time in the same direction and to the same extent as younger persons. Those who attempt to shape public opinion and who regard the elderly as attitudinally rigid and inflexible would indeed appear to be mistaken.

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